

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

November 17, 2023

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden,

We write to request that you be the first to posthumously award the Presidential Medal of Freedom collectively to the American enslaved who – under dire circumstances – played a fundamental role in building the economic foundation of our nation. This would grant them a dignity, respect, and recognition from our government they deserve but have not yet received.

As a country, we pride ourselves on the strength of the United States' economy. We celebrate its vitality and ability to bounce back from hard times. We acknowledge and respect the leaders, innovators, and hard-working families who have contributed to our economic resilience. However, we have not recognized the fact that the genesis of this economic prosperity is rooted in America's painful history of slavery. The lives of enslaved individuals built the foundation of our nation's economic infrastructure:¹ they planted and harvested the crops that fueled trade;² they constructed buildings and roads that formed the cornerstones of our growing nation;³ and they laid the groundwork to industries such as cotton and tobacco which catapulted the U.S. to the forefront of the global economy.⁴ Their sacrifices and suffering were central to our rise as an economic power.

While we can never undo the inhumane practices of our nation's history, we can take steps toward recognition and reconciliation. By posthumously awarding the Presidential Medal of Freedom to enslaved people, we would acknowledge their critical role in our history and begin to give them long-overdue credit for their contributions to this country's growth and prosperity.

We are grateful for the work your Administration has already undertaken to acknowledge this painful part of our country's history. On August 20 last year, you released a Statement marking Slavery Remembrance Day.⁵ In your statement you noted that "[g]reat nations don't hide from their history. They acknowledge their past, both the triumphs and the tragedies. Today is a day to

¹ The Center for Law and Social Policy, "African American Workers Built America," Asha Banerjee and Cameron Johnson, February 26, 2020, <https://www.clasp.org/blog/african-american-workers-built-america/>.

² PBS, "America's first big business? Not the railroads, but slavery," Sven Beckert, February 12, 2015, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/americas-first-big-business-railroads-slavery>.

³ Reuters, "Built by my family: America's grand buildings constructed by slaves," Carlos Barria and Makini Brice, August 30, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-slavery-buildings-widerimage/built-by-my-family-americas-grand-buildings-constructed-by-slaves-idUSKCN1VK1RD>.

⁴ HISTORY, "How Slavery Became the Economic Engine of the South," Greg Timmons, July 25, 2023, <https://www.history.com/news/slavery-profitable-southern-economy>.

reflect on the terrible toll of slavery, and on our nation's profound ability to heal and emerge stronger." Issuing these posthumous medals would be another important step towards healing our nation.

There is precedent for awarding this honor to a group rather than an individual. For example, the Apollo 13 Mission Operations Team was honored with the medal, recognizing the collective efforts and accomplishments of the entire group.⁶ Additionally, the Presidential Medal of Freedom has been awarded posthumously over 50 times, demonstrating our commitment to honor the contribution of individuals after their passing.⁷

To award the American enslaved people would not only recognize their formative impact on the development of our country but also signal a stronger commitment to truth, reconciliation, and social justice. This recognition could serve as a profound representation of our determination to confront our past and strive for a more equitable future.

This request would help bring justice to our nation's foundational mothers and fathers. We are convinced this would have deep resonance and could help our nation further navigate the path towards healing and unity.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Al Green
Member of Congress



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

⁵ The White House, "Statement by President Joe Biden Marking Slavery Remembrance Day," August 20, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/08/20/statement-by-president-joe-biden-marking-slavery-remembrance-day/>.

⁶ The American Presidency Project, "Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Apollo 13 Mission operations Team in Houston," Gerhard Peters and John Woolley, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-presenting-the-presidential-medal-freedom-apollo-13-mission-operations-team>.

⁷ New England Journal of Political Science, "The Politics of the Presidential Medal of Freedom: A Fifty Year Analysis, 1963-2013," vol. 8, no. 2, Fall 2015, p. 169, https://ecommons.udayton.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1081&context=pol_fac_pub; The White House, "President Biden Announces Recipients of the Presidential medal of Freedom," press release, July 1, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/01/president-biden-announces-recipients-of-the-presidential-medal-of-freedom/>.



Alma S. Adams, Ph.D.
Member of Congress



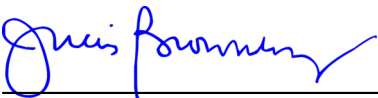
Lisa Blunt Rochester
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Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Jamaal Bowman, Ed.D.
Member of Congress



Julia Brownley
Member of Congress



Cori Bush
Member of Congress



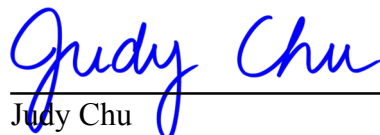
Tony Cárdenas
Member of Congress



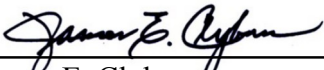
André Carson
Member of Congress



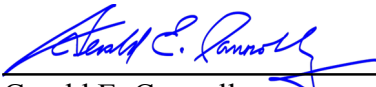
Troy Carter
Member of Congress



Judy Chu
Member of Congress




James E. Clyburn
Member of Congress



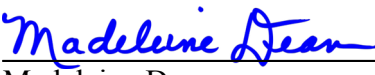
Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress



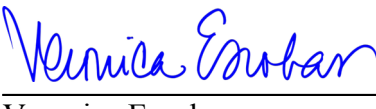
Jasmine Crockett
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Danny K. Davis
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Madeleine Dean
Member of Congress



Veronica Escobar
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Adriano Espaillat
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Dwight Evans
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Lizzie Fletcher
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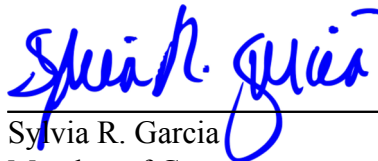
Bill Foster
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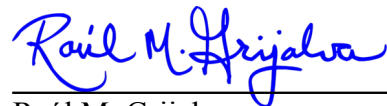
Valerie P. Foushee
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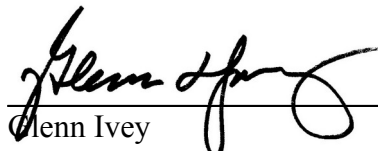
Maxwell Alejandro Frost
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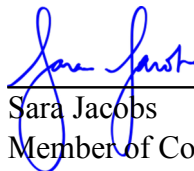
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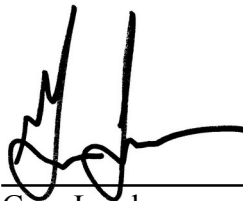
Sara Jacobs
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Alex Padilla
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Donald M. Payne, Jr.
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Katie Porter
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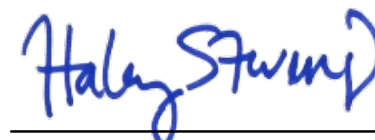
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Shri Thanedar
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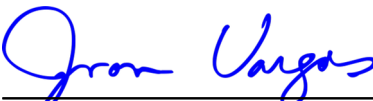
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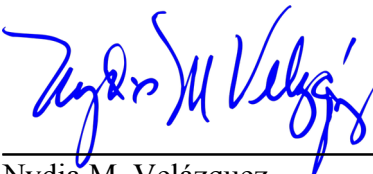
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